

What We Do Together: Understanding volunteering using the concept of associational life

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of ‘associational life’ as a way forward for researching how people engage with others in an individualised and informalized society. This concept is useful on volunteering research, as it can help the researcher to holistically understand what people’s social lives look like, as associational life includes all activities that people *do* together with others. The paper also shows how the concept of associational life has been applied to research, which has given insights into the characteristics of volunteering and how volunteering relates to other types of associational life. The aim of this paper is to introduce another tool in the arsenal of the voluntary sector researcher.

Introduction

Society and the ways we engage with other people have changed, and it has always changed, and will continue to change. These changes have mostly been framed in negative terms. The late 18th century French philosopher and mathematician de Condorcet argued that society is becoming less civic minded with every new generation (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005), and early 20th century sociologists attributed these changes in social life to urbanisation, as an effect of industrialisation. Simmel (1950) argued that cities made people to solely rely on brief bonds and were not conducive for the community. However, nostalgia is the culprit here, with 63% of the British population saying life was better when they were younger (Gaston and Hilhorst, 2018), but memories cannot be used to accurately portray what community life used to be like (Bourke, 1994).

Of course, community life has changed, as it has done so many times before without there being an actual loss of community (Thomson, 2005), and this change is a shift in emphasis from the collective to the individual. This is often referred to the individualisation or atomisation of society, and also the informalisation of society (Taylor, 1985, pp. 187–210; Wouters and Dunning, 2019). People’s identity has become a ‘project’ or a ‘task’ itself, with people *becoming* who they are, and are not ‘given’ an identity from the collective (Bauman, 2000, p. 31). This means freedom to ‘become’ whoever people want to be, but also that ‘the individual is penalised harshly not only for personal failure but also for sheer bad luck in a highly competitive and relentlessly harsh social environment’ (McGuigan, 2014, p. 234). This shift also favours relationships that are *experienced* over relationships that are structural, such as family or clan (Nancy, 1991), with friendships gaining importance, and perhaps even more important than family, some would argue (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Maffesoli, 2016).

What this shift means in real terms is that instead of meeting with friends at organised gatherings, like clubs or societies, people are increasingly engaging with others in informal settings (van Ingen and Dekker, 2011), and young people are less involved in party politics, but are not less politically active (Pickard and Bessant, 2018), and even the increased interest in running as a sport activity has been suggested to link back to a more individualised society (Llopis-Goig, 2014). So while it can be argued that this shift is neutral, in that it is neither good or bad and merely shows a shift, it can lead to a more disconnected society as the informalisation leads to less bridging social capital and more bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000), as people keep to groups they already know, which could negatively affect some groups disproportionately (Yates, 2021).

This societal shift also affects volunteering, with volunteers increasingly looking at their own experience of being a volunteer rather than being part of a collective:

A style of volunteering framed through the individual world of experience, in which the nature of involvement depends on individual preferences and needs. Reflexive volunteers conduct more specialized roles and activities, demand a high level of flexibility, and they have relatively weak feelings of identification with the organization or belonging to a volunteer group. (Hustinx et al., 2016, p. 350)

However, knowing to cater for the volunteers' individual needs is not enough – we also need to holistically understand the role that volunteering plays in people's social lives, and how it relates to other parts of people's lives. The difficulty in this is to go beyond the formal to also include informal groupings, as these are 'all-pervasive, loose-knit, changeable, amorphous, and numerous' (Newton, 1999, p. 10). The concept of 'community' lacks precision (Vaisey, 2007), and can refer to communities of *place* (Wood, 2010), *interest* (Walker, 2013), *practice* (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002), or even *imagined* communities (Anderson, 2016). This is further complicated by there being no clear delineation between community as a category of *analysis* and a category of *practice*.¹ Social capital also have definitional issues and how to properly use it (Haynes, 2009). Using the term 'leisure' is not appropriate either, as it also have issues with how to define it (Veal, 2019), and it excludes activities people do together that are more serious in nature, like activism and helping people in need.

To enable the research community to understand people's social lives in a holistic fashion in a society that has become more individualised and informal, a new concept is needed that is also able to resolve the conceptual difficulties discussed above. As such, this paper introduces the concept of *associational life* as a way for researchers, and voluntary sector researchers in particular, to better understand people's social lives and how different types of activities interact with each other.

Defining associational life

The term associational life is not new, but previous uses of it has been disjointed and fragmented. It has been used to describe people's involvement in formal organisations (e.g. Schofer and Longhofer, 2011; van Ingen and Dekker, 2011; Chan, 2014), as a synonym to the third sector (Andrews, Cowell and Downe, 2008; Jailobaeva, 2008; Evers, 2013; Bunyan, 2014), and to describe democratisation processes in African contexts specifically (Tostensen, Tvedten and Vaa, 2001; Meagher, 2010). Here, the term associational life has a specific meaning, and is referring to both the organisational and the social aspect of what people do together. This use of associational life emphasises the existence of some type of relationship between people, as well as there being some sort of format to this relationship. This enables associational life to capture many types of activities, without it being ambiguous and vague, like 'community', 'social capital,' or 'leisure.'

Thus, associational life is something people *do*, and it is done *with* others. A focus on *doing* associational life makes it less important of whether the activity takes place in a formal or informal setting and can thus accommodate the changes that individualisation and informalisation have brought with it. This means that activities like playing football in a club is associational life, but so is playing football with your friends every other Sunday morning. And both going to the local party-political meeting is as much associational life as meeting up with a group of people to protest against the closure of the local swimming pool. Playing in an eSport tournament is associational life, just as playing a board game with friends. In all these scenarios, people are *doing* something together. This means that passive descriptor of relationships, like 'family' or 'friends', are not associational life by definition. This does not exclude descriptors like family, work life, and communities from the analysis, but these are *settings* where associational life take place.

¹ See Brubaker and Cooper (2000) for a similar discussion on 'identity' as a category of practice *and* analysis.

Of course, not all activities and settings where people do something together fit neatly into this definition of associational life. Depending on the focus of the research, the workplace as a place where colleagues are working (i.e., *doing* something) together can be a type of associational life, or the focus might be on what colleagues are doing *outside* of work. Volunteering also has grey areas of when a voluntary role is done together with others or not. A person going out to litter-pick is not necessarily done *together* with others, nor is organising the receipts for the local charity *done* with others. In these two cases, it would unlikely be categorised as associational life, but other cases are harder to define. Is the volunteer tutor engaging in associational life with their student, or does the power imbalance exclude it from being associational life? Is the volunteer greeter in the hospital engaging in associational life when they are directing people to the different wards, or is this interaction too fleeting to be categorised as such? In these cases, the question of what constitutes associational life needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis, as a somewhat flexible approach to what associational life is must be allowed to enable good research to take place. While accuracy and precision are needed when doing high-quality research, the introduction of associational life is meant to aid the research community, not to police it.

Applying associational life

The next section of this paper presents the findings from the author's doctoral thesis, where associational life was used. In this mixed-methods research, associational life was used to compare volunteering to other types of associational life, using a survey and qualitative interviews. The aim of this research was to understand how volunteering might be different to other types of associational life. Because a survey was used, these 12 categories were used: Volunteering, Sports clubs and organisations, Informal group sports or exercising activities, Hobby related activities with other people (not sports related), Arts based or other cultural group activities, Youth groups, Clubs for retired or semi-retired people, Religious or spiritual groups, Vocational or learning-based clubs or organisations, Activist groups, Local community groups, and Other. A battery of questions was asked about each type of activity people took part in, which enabled analysis for each type of associational life, but could also be aggregated to compare all other types of associational life to volunteering. 14 people from different organisations were also interviewed about how people engage in their groups, and ten survey respondents were also interviewed about their associational life.

First, when asked about what makes volunteering different from other types of activities, the people interviewed for this research differentiated volunteering from other types of associational life by there being a commitment to volunteering that does not necessarily exist for other types of associational life, which the quote below shows:

I think, if you commit [to volunteering], you're implying that you're prepared to join a team and you're prepared to put time and energy into one specific organization. If you turn up and sing in a choir, for instance, you just turn up and if you don't turn up, you don't turn up. If you go to join a Pilates group, it's your problem if you don't turn up, it's not the person running the group, so that is the difference.

This is not a feature that is often discussed when defining volunteering, as they are often focusing solely on the aspect of giving help to others. In fact, two interviewees mentioned how volunteering had helped individuals they knew *because* they needed that continuity and stability that volunteering could give them, whereas other types of associational life would not be able to give them this stability. Here the concept of associational life has aided in identifying a characteristic of volunteering that might otherwise be overlooked.

By comparing volunteering to other types of associational life, differences between the two in terms of who they are doing these activities with and who introduced them can be observed (see Figure 1).

Starting by who people are engaging in associational life and volunteering with, people reported that they engage in associational life in equal parts with their friends and people they did not previously know. Compare this to volunteering, where people reported that they volunteer mostly with people they did not previously know. Family was also significantly higher for associational life than for associational life, which suggests that volunteering is less dependent on existing relationships. Similarly, when looking at who introduced the respondents to associational life and volunteering, friends and family played a larger role for associational life than for volunteering, again suggesting that volunteering is less dependent on relationships than other types of associational life.

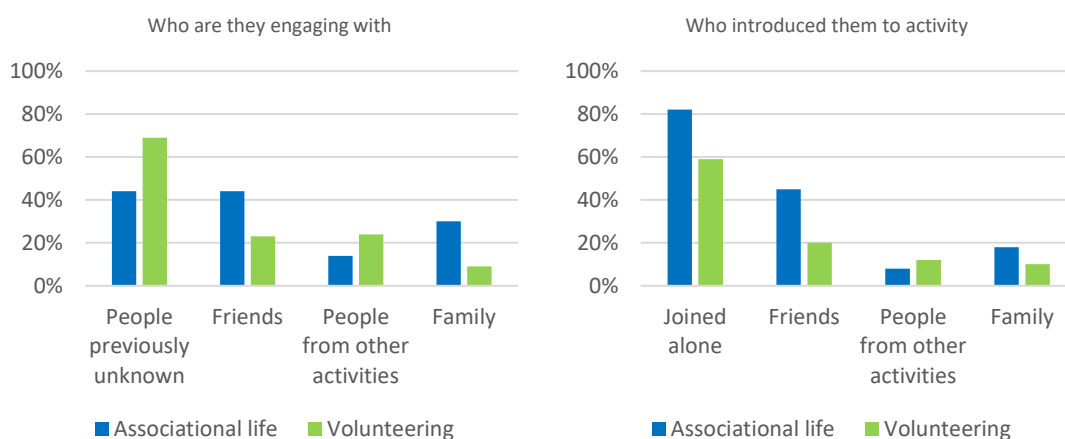


Figure 1 Who people are doing associational life and volunteering with and who introduced them to these activities

In the survey, one of the questions was if the activity led to volunteering and whether it led to volunteering in the same organisation or another organisation. Figure 2 show the results for a selection of activities and all answers combined. This show that sports and hobbies led to volunteering to a lesser degree than local community groups and religious groups, the latter being consistent with previous literature on the bonding social capital existing in religious groups (Kettell, 2019; Vermeer and Scheepers, 2019). The relatively high number of survey respondents saying their hobby led to volunteering in *another* organisation is of great interest and is somewhat surprising given the intrinsic and self-serving nature of a hobby. This finding is important for the voluntary sector, as it highlights the need to understand how hobbies lead to volunteering. This finding was enabled by using the concept of associational life and highlighting the usefulness of this concept to uncover surprising data.

These examples show the versatility and usefulness of using the concept of associational life to understand volunteering. By looking at volunteering as part of a system of activities people *do* together, this research was able to highlight characteristics of volunteering that might otherwise be overlooked. This research was also able to highlight the varying role that family and friends play for people to start to volunteer and engage in other types of associational life. This concept also enabled an understanding of the relationship between volunteering and other types of associational life.

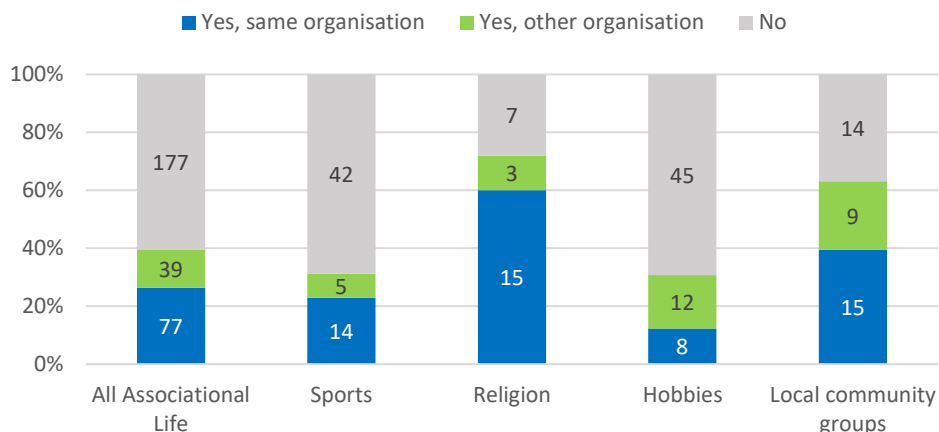


Figure 2 Associational life leading to volunteering in same or other organisation

Conclusion

Due to individualisation and informalisation of our social lives, a new holistic way of understanding people's lives is needed. This paper suggests using the concept of associational life, which is defined by what people *do* together with others. This is especially useful for voluntary sector research, as volunteering also have become more episodic and is driven by personal beliefs rather than be part of a collective. When applied in a research project it was able to highlight characteristics of volunteering that gain less attention than helping others, and it was able to understand the role that relationships play for volunteering in comparison to other types of associational life. Lastly, associational life was used as a way of understanding how people become volunteers.

This concept of associational life is versatile and can be used in a wide variety of research contexts, in relation to volunteering, as demonstrated in this paper, but also in contexts which would traditionally use concepts such as 'community' or 'social capital'. While it might seem counter-intuitive to introduce yet another concept to the academic world, and potentially be guilty of fragmenting the research world further, this conceptualisation of associational life is not a new grand theory to 'solve' how we do research on the voluntary sector. Instead, it should be understood as yet another tool in the conceptual toolbox to be used when and where appropriate. Thus, this paper is not arguing to stop using the terms community, social capital, or leisure, when appropriate. Instead, associational life offers a tool to discuss *what people do together*, considering a society that is increasingly individualised and informalised.

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